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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7038
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RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 8483
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 8531
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2260
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 9767
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0735
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 1377
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0325
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0970
RUEHXI/LABOR COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000745

SIPDIS

WHITE HOUSE FOR USTR VKADER AND AADLER
DOL/ILAB FOR RRIGBY, JPIORKOWSKI
DEPT FOR DRL/ILCSR MMITTELHAUSER, GTIP SSTEINER
DEPT ALSO FOR SCA/PB, SCA/RA, USAID

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ELAB](#) [EAGR](#) [ETRD](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH: CHILD/FORCED LABOR IN GOODS PRODUCTION - TVPRA
RESPONSE

REF: A) DHAKA 00618 B) STATE 43120 C) DHAKA/DC EMAILS MAY-JUNE 2008

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SUMMARY

1. (U) As a result of poverty and population density in Bangladesh, child labor exists throughout the country. Economic necessity requires millions of children to work for their survival and that of their families. The Government of Bangladesh (GOB) has limited capacity to enforce its labor laws, which do not cover the informal and agricultural sectors that employ many children. The GOB works closely with the International Labor Organization (ILO) to address "the worst forms of child labor." It is common for labor agents and employers to pre-pay wages to seasonal workers or internal migrants for a set period of service by children or adults. While these arrangements mostly do not involve coercion or deception, they can result in exploitative conditions.

2. (U) Ref A and this cable provide Embassy Dhaka's response to Ref B tasking. Per Ref C guidance, this cable focuses on the incidence of child labor in Bangladesh's production of matches, leather, bidis (hand-rolled cigarettes), and garments. This reporting supplements DOL-contracted reports on forced and child labor provided by Macro International subcontracted to Services and Solutions International (SSI) in Bangladesh. Post worked closely with SSI in the gathering of information and compilation of its reports. Post's new labor officer is David Arulanantham, who can be reached via email at ArulananthamDP@state.gov.

MATCHES

3. (U) During an unannounced visit to a match factory, EmbOffs found that approximately 15 percent of the workers appeared to be children under the age of 14 and another 20 percent were adolescents. Children and adolescents worked at all stages of the match manufacturing process, including shaving logs into thin sheets, stamping out sticks, drying, dipping sticks in match head chemicals, packing boxes, and printing matchbox packaging. The factory manager claimed he hired children at the request of parents who also worked in the factory. The manager reported the parents were worried about their children being exposed to drugs or other harmful influences on

the street if they were not working nearby. Given the adult workers' abject poverty the extra income was welcome, the manager added, reporting that some of the children attended school in addition to working in the factory. While profit margins are very tight in the match business, the manager stated he did not pay children any less than adult workers. Heat and insufficient fire safety precautions were the main health/safety issues for both children and adults within the factory.

LEATHER

14. (U) EmbOffs saw no child workers in the four leather tanneries visited. In the fetid tanning factories, the backbreaking work involves scraping and moving large chemical-laden skins from various baths and treatment drums. Bolstering the tannery owner's claims that children did not do this work, it seemed it would be physically impossible for a child to effectively perform most jobs within the tanneries. While a child could be involved on the margins with fetching objects or cleaning, EmbOffs saw none during unannounced site visits. We observed one child worker in a leather-crafting workshop working alongside skilled craftsmen; the boy appeared to be an apprentice.

BIDIS

15. (U) According to labor researchers, the production of bidis - hand-rolled cigarettes with a leaf wrapper - takes place in the informal sector. In response to consumer preferences, the bidi factory closest to Dhaka recently shifted to producing cheap cigarettes, involving a more mechanized operation that reportedly has limited scope for child labor. Researchers told us the rolling of bidis was traditionally the work of women and children, since

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smaller fingers were better able to roll and fold leaves.

GARMENTS: SUPPLY CHAIN CONCERNS

16. (U) Following a multi-stakeholder effort to eliminate child labor from the garment sector following the 1992 Harkin Bill, Bangladesh has maintained that its garments export sector to be child-labor free. The Solidarity Center (AFL-CIO) in Bangladesh reported that all manufacturing in Bangladesh's Export Processing Zones (EPZs) was free of child labor. According to an ILO official, it was difficult to validate the Bangladesh garment industry's claim the sector was child labor free outside the EPZs because the garment industry monitored only a fraction of the total number of garment factories. International investigative media reporting (i.e. UK's Channel 4 in 2006) on major brands (i.e. Walmart in 2005) alleged that factories producing for international brands had not been consistently child labor free in recent years. ILO consultants also suggested that while children might be actively excluded from RMG production for export, there was no corresponding effort for garments produced for Bangladesh's domestic market. Based on media and NGO reports, it seems likely child labor exists in supply industries linked to the RMG sector, and in non-export oriented RMG production.

CANDLES/FUEL LOGS

17. (U) In the Cox's Bazaar region of southeastern Bangladesh, the production of candles and combustible fuel logs for the domestic market involves child labor. For example, LabOff observed an approximately 12-year-old boy sealing plastic bags of candles with a hot iron in an informal factory - essentially a shed. A second boy was cutting vegetables to make lunch for the factory workers. A larger group of boys played nearby; they said they worked in two factories, the candle shed and another informal factory that manufactured artificial fuel logs made of compressed grain chaff. The production of candles is a low-technology manufacturing process. In fact, some NGOs use candle-making as an income-generating project for female slum dwellers.

AGRICULTURAL AND AQUACULTURAL GOODS

18. (U) Bangladesh's agricultural sector accounts for at least 20 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, and at least 50 percent of employment. Bangladesh's agricultural and informal sectors are excluded from the national labor law regime; accordingly there is no legal prohibition on the use of child labor in the rural sector. However, the GOB recognizes that some of the "worst forms of child labor" may exist in the rural sector (e.g. spice milling, fish drying) and has been working with the ILO and other donors to craft an appropriate development program response. As in many agricultural economies, child labor as part of a farming/fishing household is common and may be exploitative.

FORCED LABOR: BONDAGE BY CREDIT

19. (U) The most common form of forced labor in Bangladesh (for all ages of workers) is debt-bondage. Particularly for workers from the poorest north-western region of Bangladesh, labor agents pre-pay families for labor to be provided over a number of months in the southern areas - commonly in coastal areas associated with fishing work, for working harvest seasons, or in Bangladesh's ship breaking yards. Although some employers using bonded labor claim to repay a pro-rated amount of wages if a worker wishes to return home early, anecdotal evidence suggests most do not. Additionally, personal debts accumulated by workers and the costs of transportation to home villages further limit the option of leaving exploitative working conditions.

110. (U) In the case of children, poor families sometimes place their children with nearby employers who pre-pay them for the term of the child's employment and also agree to feed and house the child worker. The proximity of the employment allows the family to see the

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child, ensuring s/he receives food and care. LabOff observed cases of bonded child workers in the fish-drying industry in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazaar region.

COMMENT: CHILD LABOR IN DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

111. (U) International interventions related to child labor in Bangladesh fall into two main categories: the developmental and the compliance-oriented. Compliance efforts for certain product categories may successfully end child labor in targeted sectors but often fail to address the fundamental causes and consequences of child labor. From a human development standpoint, children who no longer work may no longer be able to afford school, and they may be unable to obtain food or shelter for themselves or their families. Without well-conceived development programs, a child worker who loses his employment in the formal sector may be subjected to increased exploitation and lower economic benefits in the informal sector. In this grindingly poor nation, eradicating child labor requires not only enforcement and compliance, but also development support for education, livelihoods, food, shelter and health care.

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